

CREATIVE WRITING COURSE - PART 6 - THE FIRST DRAFT AND BEYOND

A building has foundations, a writer has research.

RESEARCH: Getting to grips with the subject matter, locations, history, politics, people, dynamics, law, environment...

Task: Before tackling your first draft what might you need to research?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

When - Every writer has an individual time when they prefer to write. Keeping a consistent appointment with your muse gives a better chance of productivity and consistency. Otherwise there is a danger of creative stagnation that might lead to a frustrating halt to your project.

There is a muse, but he's not going to come fluttering down into your writing room and scatter fairy-dust all over your typewriter or computer station. He lives in the ground. He's a basement guy. You have to descend to his level, and once you get down there you have to furnish an apartment for him to live in. You have to do all the grunt labor, in other words, while the muse sits and smokes cigars and admires his bowling trophies and pretends to ignore you. Do you think that is fair? He maybe not be much to look at, that muse guy, and he may not be much of a conversationalist (what I get out of mine is mostly surly grunts, unless he's on duty), but he's got the inspiration. It's right you should do all the work and burn all the midnight oil, because the guy with the cigar and the little wings has got a bag of magic. There's stuff in there that can change your life. Believe me I know. - [Steven King]

Task - Write down when you will make an appointment with your muse.

.....



Where - A writer not only needs time to write but to find a special place to hide away and get stuck into a project without the impediment of outside distractions. You can read anywhere, almost, but when it comes to writing, library carrels, park benches, and rented flats should be courts of last resort —Truman Capote said he did his best work in motel rooms, but he is an exception; most of us do our best in a place of our own. Until you get one, you'll find your new resolution to write a lot hard to take seriously. - [Stephen King]

Though this seems a very sensible approach to getting your work done there are other writers who prefer a distraction or two.

Among the many myths about writing is that writers hate to be disturbed. In truth, working writers live for disturbance. A writer who is not from time to time interrupted soon finds himself compiling lengthy shopping lists, cleaning his nails, rereading the lost-dog ads in the classified. Myself, I phone 800 numbers, tilting toward Utah ski resorts. The lost little cabin in the woods —no neighbors for miles, no disruption save the chirping of birds —is the the novice's dream but the working writer's nightmare. In such a setting a real writer soon goes stark raving mad. - [Richard Walter]

Task - Write down where you are going to meet your muse whether it be in total isolation or in a setting that incorporates other interactions.

.....

Work Load: How many words and how long for?- Though a writer doesn't want to get too regimented when creating his or her project a handy way to keep the creative fires burning is to set a certain amount of words to be written a day. It may be anything up to two pages worth or fifty thousand words. This of course is entirely up to each individual writer. Stephen King suggests up to a thousand words for the rookie writer. However I think up to five hundred is probably more realistic and a good working platform to build up from there.

Task - Write a realistic estimate of how many words you could write a day.

.....

Time - If writing to a word count seems too rigid or daunting a more feasible way might be to write to an allotted time.

Task - Write a realistic estimate of how many hours you can give to writing a day.

.....

Work according to program, not according to mood. Stop at the appointed time. . . Discard the program when you feel like it —but go back to it the next day. - [Henry Miller]

Maybe It Doesn't Matter. Writing at your own whim might be more your style.

It does not matter how slowly you go, so long as you do not stop. - [Confucius]

The First Draft - The first draft is exactly that and is a launching pad for more drafts



thereafter. Never look for perfection or exactness in your first draft. In fact never look for these unrealistic attributes full stop. While writing your first draft give yourself permission to write crap. There is no escaping it.

You are free to write the worst junk in the universe. - [Natalie Goldberg]

Writing a first draft is like groping one's way into a dark room, or overhearing a faint conversation, or telling a joke whose punchline you've forgotten. As someone said, one writes mainly to rewrite and revising is how one's mind comes to inhabit the material fully. - [Ted Solotaroff]

The best way to write a first draft is simple. Just keep writing. You can only get to your destination one word at a time.

Begin at the beginning, go through to the end, then stop. - [Lewis Carroll]

I used to work in bursts of intuition. Now I find the very process of working step by step feeds the imagination. - [Anne Truitt]

Nothing kills the will to work more surely than contemplating the entirety of the work when all we need do is engage the work right before our eyes. - [Eric Maisel]

Don't Hold Back - Put in everything you can possibly think of in the first draft otherwise you might miss out on a little gem of an idea.

I very much believe in the principle of superabundance and the attendant principle of cutting back. You can always take out or change, but you cannot always put in. - [James Dickey]

Never Get In The Way Of A Good Story - Sometimes during a writing session set ideas might take an unusual turn. This is when the story suddenly reveals a new idea from deep within the subconscious. Never let your bloody-mindedness get in the way of a fresh approach that may change the whole construction of your narrative for the better. Writing isn't just about constructing a story, but also discovering what lies in wait to be told. This can happen not only in a first draft but in later revisions.

I know that my original idea for a story is going to be only the point of departure for something that will push me in an unexpected way. - [Mario Vargas Llosa]

Improvement makes straight roads; but the crooked roads without Improvement are roads of Genius. - [William Blake]

The conscious mind is going to suggest the obvious, the cliché, because these things offer the security of having succeeded in the past. Only the mind that has been taken off itself and put on a task is allowed true creativity. - [David Mamet]

To Show or Not to Show - While writing a first draft it is in the writer's best interest to keep his or her work close to the chest.

The first draft – the All-Story Draft – should be written with no help (or interference) from anyone else. There may come a point when you want to show what you're doing to a close friend (very often the close friend you think of first is the one who shares your bed), either

because your proud of what you're doing or because you're doubtful about it. My best advice is to resist this impulse. Keep the pressure on; don't lower it by exposing what you've written to the doubt, the praise, or even the well-meaning questions of someone from the Outside World. There'll be a time to show off what you've done when you finish...but give yourself a chance to think while the story is still like a field of freshly fallen snow, absent of any tracks save your own. -[Steven King]

OR

It might be far more helpful to you to have a writing mentor looking over your shoulder to help spur you on and give you constructive advice as to how your book should proceed. A creative editor is not necessarily a good proof reader. In fact the last thing you should worry about is how good the punctuation and spelling is. That can be fixed later by any capable technician.

Let the First Draft Simmer for a While -

After finally completing your first draft put it away for a little while and let it breathe. How long you let your book rest —sort of like bread dough between kneadings —is entirely up to you, but I think it should be a minimum of six weeks. During this time your manuscript will be safely shut away in a desk drawer, aging and (one hopes) mellowing. Your thoughts will turn to it frequently, and you'll likely be tempted a dozen times or more to take it out, if only to re-read some passages that seems particularly fine in your memory, something you'd like to get back to so you can re-experience what a really exciting writer you are. Resist temptation. - [Stephen King]

Once unearthing your first draft and looking at it with fresh eyes a new perspective will be found and a better idea on how to tackle the second draft.

The Second Draft

The second draft is about picking out the diamonds from the rough of the first draft. Once done a more acute picture of your story should appear. All that can be done is take the existing material and discard nine-tenths of it. - [Frank Rines]

I write one page of masterpiece to ninety-one pages of shit. - [Ernest Hemingway to Scott Fitzgerald]

Editing

Revising your work is essential in order to improve your story. In a sense the real shape and theme of your tale only starts to appear once the writer sees what is needed to be subtracted or added. How does a writer determine for once and for all whether or not a line, or character, a bit of action, or any other aspect of the script (book) is worthy or worth chucking? Supposing there are —as indeed there often are —arguments on both sides, arguments for keeping a piece of material and arguments for discarding it? The United States Department of Agriculture provides a wonderful rule. What does a citizen do upon opening a jar of home-preserved food only to discover something suspicious such as gas, discoloration,



odor? Tasting even just the tiniest portion in the case of salmonella could cause a healthy adult to grow perilously ill. With botulism, it could just as easily prove fatal. The USDA came up with a rule that serves not only home preservers but also writers: When in doubt throw it out! - [Richard Walter]

How Many Drafts? - There are no specific rules as to how many drafts should be written. Stephen King will only write two, but as much as his advice is valuable his take on it is a personal one (and lets face it the guy is a genius). My advice is to write as many drafts as it takes until you feel you cannot take the story any further.

To rewrite ten times is not unusual. - [Saul Bellow]

Kill Your Darlings - There maybe some particularly fine work that you have written, but it might also hinder the overall narrative of the book either through slowing down the pace or being superfluous to requirements.

To revise, all you have to do is take away everything that isn't the story. It's especially tough to take out a scene that may be very good, but bad for the story as a whole. - [David Kaplan]

The difference between me and an amateur is I cut out the boring bits. - [Elmore Leonard]

Task - Write a scene for your book as a first draft. After you have completed the task read it out in order for it to be reappraised as a mini second draft.